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AUTHOR Krasnow, Jean H.; And Others
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ABSTRACT

The Reach Out to Schools: Social Competency Program is an elementary school curriculum project based on the understanding that improving the nature and quality of classroom relationships is the key to increased social and academic success for all children. The program includes a year-long elementary school curriculum, an experiential teacher training program, a train-the-trainer model of dissemination, and an evaluation strategy emphasizing reflection through teacher research. Structured class meetings in an open-circle format provide a predictable and supportive format for instruction and practice in three competency areas: creating a cooperative classroom environment; building self-esteem and positive relationships; and solving interpersonal problems. Second-year teachers participate in action research and peer coaching. This paper summarizes findings of interviews conducted with 15 of the 18 teacher participants new to the 1990-91 program and with 3 classes of students. Teachers reported that the program was particularly successful in helping them to distinguish between the roles of teacher as teller and teacher as facilitator and in encouraging changes in their teaching behavior. They reported that the curriculum affected the classroom in several areas--management, student participation, inclusion of special education students, group problem solving, and improved schoolwide behavior. The students expressed positive attitudes toward the curriculum, particularly toward the ways in which the lessons encouraged listening, inclusion, and group problem solving. (Contains 28 references.) (LMI)

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ED 361 830

Project Report
1990 - 1991

The Social Competency Program of the Reach Out to Schools Project

Jean H. Krasnow
Pamela J. Seigle
Roberta Kelly

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The Stone Center
for Developmental
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Wellesley College
Wellesley, MA 02181

No. 1
1992

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The Stone Center
for Developmental Services and Studies

The Stone Center is dedicated to the prevention of psychological problems, the enhancement of psychological well-being, and the search for a more comprehensive understanding of human development. Particular attention is paid to the experience of women, children, and families across culturally diverse populations.

The mission is carried out through development of theory, research, education, consultation, action programs, and counseling, in collaboration with the Wellesley College community and other institutions and individuals.

The Stone Center was created in 1981 by a generous gift to Wellesley College from Robert S. and Grace W. Stone, parents of a Wellesley graduate. The Center's programs reflect the Stone family's interest in preventing psychological distress.

Correspondence and inquiries about the Reach Out to Schools Project should be addressed to: Reach Out to Schools Project, The Stone Center, Wellesley College, 106 Central Street, Wellesley, MA 02181.

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Social Competency Program: Reach Out to Schools Project

Jean H. Krasnow, Pamela Seigle, Roberta Kelly

About the Authors

Jean H. Krasnow is the program evaluator for the Reach Out to Schools Project. She has published articles on teacher research, the relationship between the organization of teacher work life and student learning, and strategies to increase parent involvement in schools. A former classroom teacher, she now teaches at Wheelock College.

Pamela Seigle is the director of the Reach Out to Schools Project. She is a former classroom teacher, school psychologist, and staff developer particularly interested in teacher development and the challenge of creating a sense of community in schools.

Roberta Kelly is the training consultant for the Reach Out to Schools Project. She has worked as a management consultant and trainer in corporate and non-profit settings. She has extensive experience in designing and developing train-the-trainer, facilitation, and group dynamics training models.

Abstract

The Reach Out to Schools: Social Competency Program is an elementary school curriculum project based on the understanding that improving the nature and quality of classroom relationships is the key to increased social and academic success for all children. The project includes a year-long elementary school curriculum, an experiential training program for teachers, a train-the-trainer model of dissemination, and an evaluation strategy emphasizing reflection through teacher research. The entire curriculum is designed to promote a safe and nurturing classroom environment in which all children can grow and learn. Structured class meetings, in an open circle format twice a week, provide a predictable and supportive format for instruction and practice in three competency areas:

- *creating a cooperative classroom environment*
- *building self esteem and positive relationships*
- *solving interpersonal problems*

In the second year of the program, experienced teachers make a commitment to coach new teachers; some participate in a teacher research project to reflect on the impact of the curriculum on their classroom and teaching style. As the curriculum seeks to empower students by enhancing their social and problem solving skills, the training and research elements of the project seek to empower teachers by enhancing their facilitation skills and encouraging reflection on classroom and school practice.

This report summarizes interviews with 15 of the 18 teachers who were new to the program in 1990-1991. Findings indicate that teachers participated in the program because they view the acquisition of social competencies as a central responsibility of an elementary school curriculum and because they are increasingly concerned about the extent and intensity of the emotional and behavioral issues that children are bringing with them to school. Teachers found the curriculum format to be clear and easy to incorporate into their school day. They reported that the training program was particularly successful in helping them to distinguish between the role of teacher as teller and teacher as facilitator and in encouraging changes in their teaching behavior by increasing facilitation and modeling the behaviors taught in the curriculum. Teachers described the impact of the curriculum in several areas: classroom management, student participation, inclusion of special education students, group problem solving efforts, and improved school-wide behavior. The students interviewed expressed positive attitudes toward the curriculum, particularly

toward the ways the lessons encourage listening, inclusion, and group problem solving.

As a practical application of Stone Center theory (Miller, 1986), the Reach Out to Schools program emphasizes the central role of relationships to student growth and development and provides an explicit strategy to develop cooperative and supportive behaviors within the classroom and the school.

Plans for the project for 1992-1993 include expansion of the program to nine cities and towns in the Boston area (65 classrooms) and continued data collection emphasizing the voices of teachers and students as they evaluate the project in their schools.

Acknowledgements

The Reach Out to Schools Project is supported by the Stone Center for Developmental Services and Studies and by Roche Bros. Supermarkets, Inc. Grace and Robert Stone provided the impetus and initial funding to support the implementation of a prevention program for elementary school children. This past year (1990-1991) additional funds were obtained from Roche Bros Supermarkets, Inc. As part of his commitment to build stronger communities of the future, Patrick Roche, President of Roche Bros., has strongly supported the program. These families continue to make a significant contribution to the project both financially and in their sustained commitment to providing resources to foster the healthy development of children. We are most grateful to them.

Background

Statistics that reflect the social and academic status of children in the United States are truly alarming. In 1970, 16% of our children lived in poverty. By the mid-1980's, the figure was 22% (Richardson & Colfer in Goodlad, 1990). Programs such as Head Start that were designed to serve poor children reach only one out of five children who are eligible (Levin, 1985). The national school drop-out rate is 24% and is as high as 40% in many urban areas (Richardson and Colfer in Goodlad, 1990). Our achievement scores as a nation compare unfavorably to other industrialized countries. The media reports daily on a range of adolescent behaviors that are of enormous concern: suicide, drug use, and criminal behavior.

Increasingly large numbers of our children, whether from urban or suburban homes, enter school with identified risk factors. Some researchers emphasize factors in the home and society. Others pay heed to the schools as possible causes of school failure. In either case, the prevailing model of addressing the needs of these students is the "medical diagnosis and remediation model" which attempts to isolate an individual or family characteristic that is seen as responsible, treat the symptom, and return the child/adolescent to the family or school setting (Richardson and Colfer in Goodlad, 1990). But this often becomes an individual remediation strategy that falls into a deficit model, placing blame on the individual student and family.

Role of Social Competency

In 1986 the National Institute of Mental Health recommended that all school curricula include social competency building programs as a way of preventing social, behavioral, and health problems in children (Elias, 1989). This recommendation was based on the assumption that childhood problems in peer relationships, often the result of deficiencies in social skills, are associated with adjustment problems in adolescence and adulthood. Thus, if all children were given the opportunity to learn social competency skills, their ability to make and maintain relationships with others would increase, and the likelihood of future mental health problems would decline. And, of course, their chances of school success would increase. Several such preventive program efforts are underway to implement instruction in these areas and assess their impact (Weissberg, 1980; Shure, 1982; Schelkun, 1987; Elias, 1989; Elias and Clabby, 1989; Battistch, 1990; and Kohn, 1991).

Program Overview

The Reach Out to Schools: Social Competency Program is an action project of the Stone Center which combines a theoretical basis that emphasizes the central role that relationships play in development; a commitment to year-long instruction within the classroom setting; and an experiential training model which encourages changes in teacher behavior by increasing facilitation skills.

In 1987, under the leadership of Carolyn Swift, former director of the Stone Center, the project was implemented in the Framingham Public Schools, using the Quality of School Life curriculum written by Ruth F.

Schelken (1989). Between 1988 and 1991, the Social Competency Program evolved as an adaptation and expansion of the Quality of School Life curriculum and other well-researched methods of instruction in social competency skills (Spivack, Platt, & Shure, 1976; Weissberg et al, 1980; Elias & Clabby, 1989). The Stone Center relational theory has given a clear focus to the curriculum's overall goals and objectives. Teachers working with the curriculum have helped shape the present format, many of the current classroom activities, and have informed the training and consultation processes.

The entire format of this program recognizes the critical role that relationships play in the social development and academic success of children. Peer interactions and classroom discourse between children act as "scaffolding" to bring them to new levels of thinking and perspective taking. Thus, the entire social environment of a classroom critically influences children's growth as it may encourage or discourage the risk-taking necessary for learning. It is not sufficient to teach individual children particular social skills; to create growth enhancing relationships, the entire classroom ecology must shift to a supportive, collaborative environment. As children learn the social competencies to make and maintain new and diverse relationships with classmates, they create new avenues for their own and others' growth.

In writing about the significance of relationships to growth and development, Jean Baker Miller has suggested that positive relationships create energy, action, a more accurate self image, a greater sense of self worth, and an increased motivation to make connection with other people (1986). The explicit instruction and practice in various social competency skills provided in the curriculum helps students and teachers build more positive relationships and together create a supportive and nurturing classroom environment. The Reach Out to Schools program design reflects the belief that improved social relationships in classrooms create motivation and the confidence that enables learning to occur. All children benefit from the explicit instruction in these critical skills; they are neither remedial in nature nor solely appropriate for children at risk of school failure.

The Reach Out to Schools curriculum contains 50 lessons in three competency areas:

- creating a cooperative classroom environment
- building self esteem and positive relationships
- solving interpersonal problems

The curriculum is taught in an open circle format which emphasizes inclusiveness; there is always an extra chair. It is presented two times a week during the entire school year. And, unlike other programs which target only certain grades, the entire set of skills is introduced in every grade. This facilitates reinforcement of skills and eliminates the often remedial aspect of some interventions.

Teachers in the program are supported by experiential based training in which they learn and practice the skills of the curriculum. The program is designed so that the teachers first learn the competencies themselves, then teach them to the children, and model these skills in all classroom activities. The Reach Out to Schools program gives special attention to teachers and to their training and personal development. Teachers are not asked to teach a series of lessons; rather, they are supported as they make a fundamental shift in role from "teller/ expert" to "facilitator" of a learning environment. Initial feedback from the teachers has confirmed that they too are learning new social competencies and applying them to their personal as well as classroom lives. In the second year of the program, experienced teachers coach teachers in their school who are new to the program, and some participate in a teacher research project to document the impact of the curriculum on their classrooms and personal teaching style. These activities address the concern frequently mentioned in the research literature on the limited nature of carryover in social competency interventions. The Reach Out to Schools program helps teachers change behaviors and then makes them coaches to help others do the same.

James Comer (1990), from his perspective as a child psychiatrist and director of the Yale University/ New Haven Schools partnership, stresses the link between the quality and characteristics of the early relationships experienced by a child with that child's capacity to build and maintain relationships within the school setting. He argues that such capacity is essential for cognitive growth. It is so essential, in fact, that Comer believes that schools must increasingly take on the teaching of common social competencies as part of its core curriculum if equality of educational opportunity is to be assured. The Reach Out to Schools: Social Competency Program provides an explicit classroom curriculum and teacher

training program to develop improved social relationships and increased cognitive development for all children.

Preliminary Findings from Interviews and Workshop Evaluations

Sample

Eighteen teachers participated in the 1990-1991 Social Competency Program. They were all elementary school teachers from four towns in the greater Boston area: Needham, Framingham, Medfield, and Wellesley. They averaged 13 years of teaching experience. Three teachers had over 20 years experience; 7 teachers had 16-20 years; 5 had 10-15; and only 3 had less than 10 years of classroom experience. Two had several years experience as special education teachers. Two teachers taught 5th grade, 8 taught 4th grade, 3 taught 3rd grade, 4 taught 2nd grade, and one was a kindergarten teacher.

When questioned about previous training in areas related to the social competency program, 10 indicated previous training in group dynamics, 10 in problem solving strategies, 10 in cooperative learning, and 9 in communication skills. In-service staff development workshops were the principle source of this instruction.

All teachers were Caucasian; 17 were female; all were middle class.

Three classes of students were interviewed. All of the students were fourth graders whose ages ranged between 9 and 10. Two classes were from Needham schools; one was from Wellesley.

Procedures

Fifteen of the 18 teacher participants in the 1990-1991 program were interviewed in May 1991. Each teacher was asked why they chose to participate in the program, what they saw as the impact (if any) of the curriculum on individual students or classroom atmosphere, and what impact (if any) they felt the training had had on their behaviors as a teacher. The interviews were conducted in the schools and lasted about 45 to 60 minutes each. They were taped and later fully transcribed. In addition, teachers were asked to evaluate each lesson in the curriculum, to comment on the consultation process, and to complete a written evaluation after each training session. The material that follows is taken from the transcripts of the interviews and the written evaluations. The transcripts were analyzed to identify recurring themes. These themes have become the basis for the research questions in 1991-1992.

In addition, for this first report, three classes of students were asked what word or idea came to mind when they thought about the program and if they could give an example of how they used what they learned from the curriculum in their school or home lives. The interviews were videotaped and largely transcribed. The student responses also helped to identify some themes to examine more closely in year two.

Teachers' Perceptions of Program's Value

Teachers choose to participate in this project for several different reasons. Some teachers saw it as an opportunity to address the growing number of personal and social problems exhibited by their students:

"I would like my students to be happy to come to school, and I would like them to accept each other's strengths and weaknesses. This particular group can be both physically and verbally abusive to each other. I would like to see a decrease in this behavior."

"I would like my students to talk out their problems rather than fighting or teasing each other. I would like them to be able to work together cooperatively."

"I would like to continue to develop strategies for children to use when they encounter problems with other children."

Some teachers saw the program as an opportunity to learn something new, in some cases an aspect of teaching they had avoided in the past:

"I felt I hadn't had formal training in this area. It's not a curriculum thing; it was dealing with the child."

"I thought it would be a good way to deal with children, almost in a management style. Also, I feel it was an area I shied away from. I didn't do magic circle. I'm not a therapist. I didn't want them bringing in all kinds of personal problems. But this isn't abstract. I liked the specific objectives and goals. I saw them as practical, life-long skills, as having the potential to make my classroom a better place to teach and learn."

The largest group felt that the curriculum provided

a clear and organized approach to teaching material they believe should be included in all elementary classrooms:

"So many aspects of the curriculum are things I have done but never in so organized a forum. So many things in the curriculum were things that over the last 18 years I've had concerns about, but then I've never seen it laid out in a curriculum. It provided me with lots of things that I believe should be part of an elementary curriculum; it provided me with a structure. So I guess that's how I see it, as validating and organizing lots of things for me."

"I've always had class meetings, discussed issues, and tried to build self esteem in the classroom. But when I saw the curriculum, I saw that someone had made sense of all these ideas and provided order to it. It was validating. Teachers worry that the non-academic can feel like a waste of time, but you can't get on with the rest until you take care of these issues..."

There was no one reason for joining. Some teachers came with enthusiasm, and others were much more cautious:

"This is not my kind of thing at all. I'm not comfortable dealing with all these social issues that you deal with. But over the years, I guess I've learned that you just can't let anything slide or just hope it's going to correct itself. It's my least favorite part of teaching. I don't feel personal reward when things are resolved. Years ago I used to let things like that slide; but since I've had my own children, I've realized you can't let anything slide. Conflicts on the playground ... have to be discussed."

Teachers' Responses to Training

Teachers' evaluations of the training were extremely positive. They were asked to rank (1-10, with 10 as excellent) the way the workshops were conducted, the usefulness of the materials, and their own readiness to implement the Social Competency lessons. Of the 16 teachers responding, 13 rated the workshops at 10, 11 rated the materials at 10, and 11 rated their readiness at 10. No rank below 8 was given for any aspect of the training.

In the interviews teachers repeatedly commented about the collegial atmosphere of the group and the professional nature of the training. Most of these teachers did not know each other prior to the training. Several commented that the team building exercises they experienced brought the group together quickly and that they would promote similar activities in their classrooms. Following are typical teacher comments on the training:

"Part of my good feelings about this (project) come from the way Pam and her staff have chosen to treat us. That sounds so self-centered, but it does something to my value as an educator to have a pleasant environment in which to hold meetings. There was a theme of respectfulness and openness. I personally don't think it would have had nearly the impact without that staff present. It makes a huge difference. I don't know that I recognized what a big difference it made until I thought about so many other big projects and meetings that just didn't give me that feeling. It makes a huge difference."

"If you want teachers to be more professional, you have to put them in a professional setting. You sit with children all day long. It's so nice to be comfortable: right size chairs, an hour for lunch!"

"The whole environment there (Wellesley College) is just so incredible and added such professionalism to the program. I don't know if it would fly if we were meeting once a month in someone's classroom. It takes you to a new environment, creates a tone, and gives you a chance to meet with other colleagues. People miss that. You go through the day in your own classroom, and I teach in a good school that encourages us to work together. But still..."

At the end of the school year, teachers were asked to reflect on the impact that the training had on them. Their comments are rather extraordinary, particularly considering the fact that many teachers indicated they had had other training in group dynamics and communication skills at other times in their careers. Samples of the nature of the comments included:

"The training has had a positive impact on me. It has forced me to step outside of myself and take another look at what I'm doing in the classroom and why. It has given me exciting new focus points."

"It has made me stop and think about how I have handled situations in the past. I have made some positive changes. I feel it is something that offers me the opportunity to develop better social

skills for myself as well. I know it is not a 'miracle cure,' but it is a good start."

"Training has increased my self confidence and helped me explore my leadership style and potential. The program has been energizing. I 'see' things differently."

"The training has had a significant impact on me. I feel more confident within the training group and, as a result, more confident in other group situations. I feel that I am a more effective observer of group dynamics and more reflective in evaluating my students, lessons, and myself."

"I think more about the questions I ask."

Impact of Curriculum on Classroom

Teachers felt that there was more participation by more students in the circle than in other classroom settings. The circle format and curriculum content seemed to foster equalitarian participation. They also repeatedly commented that students seem genuinely to enjoy the circle time:

"The circle is free space to express thoughts; it isn't academic. Students who aren't academic have knowledge; now we can hear them. In circle there is no fear of sharing and no pressure. It's like an extra year to build self esteem. Kids of all different levels can participate and feel just as good as everybody else. There are no marks and no writing... It doesn't matter what math or reading level, every child gets something out of it in their life, like 'self talk' or problem solving."

"The children have loved it."

Teachers said they learned more about the children and felt that the children learned about each other through the activities of the circle:

"The circle provides the opportunity for me to listen to each child. There are always going to be those children that you know very well, but the circle makes me come in contact with more individual students."

Teachers repeatedly described increased time for academic work as one important result of the circle meetings. In addition, some teachers observed the carry-over of behaviors from circle to other class activities. Following are examples they mentioned:

"I have more class time for academics because there is better behavior."

"It (meetings) avoids wasted time and saves class time. All that whispering and school yard fights are aired; then we go back to work."

"It (the curriculum) certainly supports basic classroom management. It's not necessarily an add-on. These are things we would spend lots of class time on anyway. So we are spending time in a more formalized way rather than a reactive way. I personally feel it's valuable, but it's difficult to measure change in behavior in a year."

"'Self Talk' before a test: when they do math — if that's hard for them — they talk it out."

"I used the ideas in regular classes. I tried to compliment them; they complimented each other. Before a test they take a minute to 'self talk'. We were reading Stone Fox, Call it Courage, *and other books; they are connecting the ideas of circle to the characters."*

Four teachers used the term "empowerment" to describe both the students' participation in classroom norms and routines and in their heightened ability to problem solve:

"When they are involved in decision making they feel so empowered and invested. A quiet and shy boy came to meeting to talk about lunch: how rushed it was, pushing and shoving. We brainstormed all sorts of ideas and decided on some new procedures. We make decisions about the design of the room, the helpers, the chores. These are second graders. Next year I'll do problem solving sooner and increase their participation in organizational decisions for the class."

"I have a boy with annoying behavior problems. The girls complained, and I asked, 'What can they do?' Before, everyone wanted the teacher to 'fix him up.' Now students have to strategize their own behavior: what can they do?"

"They had such a sense of empowerment putting things on the agenda. We have a class bank for lunch money. If anyone forgets, they can borrow. But people weren't paying back the money. We talked about how to restock the bank... Once they put that item on the open agenda, it takes the immediacy away, instead of, 'Can we do it now?

Can we do it now?'. When they have an issue they have to do something with it. Putting it on the agenda is doing something important. They know we will get to it."

Teachers mentioned that often they had seen a positive impact on special education students, particularly those who were emotionally immature. In one interview an experienced special education teacher commented on behaviors she now sees in regular education classes:

"I have a background in special education. I used to sit at meetings and think, 'Why can't that child stay in the regular classroom? This seems minor to me. Why does that child have to go out?' Now as a classroom teacher I've found that there isn't much difference between my special education classes and my regular education students. I don't know if it's the times, but there are more children coming with more problems. I just can't believe the emotional needs the children bring and how much time we spend on them... I have children who, I would say, have serious emotional problems that I'm not sure that in other schools would be in regular classrooms."

"I taught substantially separate classrooms in the past, so that's always been my background. First of all, you have to get a child's self esteem up; they have to feel good about coming to school. It's most important for a child to be a healthy human being. If I work hard on behavior now, they will learn more."

In one school three teachers mentioned that other school personnel (office secretaries, cafeteria workers) noticed changes in the behavior of the classes that were using the curriculum:

"The specialists have noticed how this class makes better transitions. She has asked to learn the program so she will have the 'cue words.'"

"There is a real carry-over into everything. The media specialist wants to learn the jargon. She even tried things she heard me say, and she couldn't believe the change."

"In the beginning it's always hard to establish control. My student teacher can use a lot of the elements of the program to help establish herself. That's why a couple of people have mentioned incorporating the specialists in years to come."

Students brought all kinds of problems to the circle and asked their classmates for help. Teachers were surprised at both the range and numbers of issues children were facing and also at their ability to problem solve for each other. Following are typical teacher comments:

"I was fascinated that they always come up with more solutions than I expect."

"I didn't give them the credit they deserved. They do know a lot more than I thought. They also have a lot more issues than I thought!"

Here are samplings of the problems brought to circle by 4th- and 5th-grade students:

"Scott had his house broken into one night. He couldn't sleep after that. He asked if we could meet as a class to maybe give him suggestions. Many good ideas came up: lights on, music, open door. Another girl was moving to a new town; it was very difficult. The children came up with lots of good ideas for her about trying to meet someone. She came back and said she did meet someone and that the new friend was going to introduce her to others."

"A little girl's grandmother died,and the mother took it very hard. The little girl wasn't talking about her feelings at home. Her mother was concerned. It occurred to the child she could discuss this in circle. We started talking about losing people and how we feel about that. Sometimes we need feeling masks, but we don't want to wear them all the time and never show our true feelings..."

"The girls were really making fun of one another. I was hearing these things and couldn't believe it. I could feel the tension rise in circle as we talked about how people felt. I just had to let them say it. We confronted it and asked how it makes people feel. There were some tears. It's hard to hear what others think, but it's better now than in middle school when social skills are even more important."

Teachers were not able to form a clear cut impression about the possible gender differences in the way the curriculum operates in the classroom:

"Boys are better problem solvers. They work on the problem, not just try to please the teacher. Girls are more likely to say what they think the teacher

wants."

"...My initial reaction is that girls participate more than boys, particularly in the compliment area. The boys said it was so hard, so difficult to give compliments."

Impact of Training and Curriculum on Classroom Practice

After almost eight months working with the curriculum, trying out new teaching strategies, and discussing the changes they were seeing or difficulties they were having, teachers commented on the shift in their role from "teacher as teller" to "teacher as facilitator of learning." Teachers commented both on the curriculum and their role with it:

"The training has made me more aware of my students' feelings. I tend to watch them more and try to react less. I also think the circle has made the children more aware of my feelings as a person."

"I think my responses to kids are more positive, encouraging, and supportive. Positive feedback, complimenting, etc. are a more frequent part of my repertoire. ...I think there is a good balance of task and process in my classroom... Time spent on group atmosphere can play an important part in the academic success of individuals."

"I've learned to accept many 'group' decisions and see them as far better than my own past decisions on classroom dynamics and management. When the children have a say in outcome, they respect others and property. The class is more at ease. The atmosphere is busy yet comfortable."

"The skills I have learned as facilitator are beginning to carry over into other parts of the school day, i.e. class discussions, science experiments, discussing literature, social studies, and pre-writing activities."

"I find myself thinking more about meetings as a process, not just a forum to get a job done. I hope I can put the skills in place in segments of my personal and professional life which have slipped into 'just get it done.'"

Impact of Curriculum on Students

Students seemed to feel that sharing their issues and problems helped them to get on with more traditional school work. They characterized the circle time very positively, noting particularly that it was different from other aspects of the school day: less competition and less teasing. Following is a sample of their comments:

(female) *"If I have a problem or something at home, it usually bugs me. You can't concentrate, can't do school. If you tell your problem, sometimes it helps you solve the problem."*

(male) *" It feels good, peaceful, and calm, a time out, no teasing, no shouting out. Kind of opens up things, made the classroom better. Things wouldn't go as good in the class without it."*

(male) *"I liked the challenge. It took me a long time to figure out what to think, what we felt. That was challenging..."*

(female) *"When we were working on the problem solving steps in class, I had a problem, and it really helped me."*

(female) *"If you've had a bad day and you get a compliment, it feels good."*

(male) *"You learn things that help you in school and on the playground... Out on the playground some kids said they didn't have popularity; now kids let them play, because of circle."*

(female) *"If you don't express your feelings, they (friends) can't help. If you lock it up inside, it won't get better."*

(male) *"You feel good because classmates understand."*

(male) *"I like it 'cause it's fun and it's a relief."*

Parent Response to Curriculum

During interviews several teachers reported that parents had mentioned behaviors at home that seemed like carry-over from the social competency curriculum. Several teachers tried to keep the parents informed about the program through classroom newsletters. Two or three teachers presented to parent groups throughout the year, reporting on the program and its goals. Some teachers mentioned that they hope to use the newsletter more next year as a way of communicating with parents about the curriculum and perhaps hold some parent workshops.

Teachers heard a need expressed by parents for help, perhaps in the form of parent training in ways to help their children at home. Typical teacher comments follow:

"Parents mention the lingo like 'self talk' and '3D's'. That, to me, is really powerful because of all the stuff that kids could be telling parents about, some kids are sharing this. That's amazing."

"Parents loved the terminology and wanted to learn more. I sent home a weekly newsletter and tried to include some of it. We are trying to get funds (from the school) for a summer workshop with parents; we'll get parents more involved next year."

Preliminary Analysis

In writing about the significance of relationships to growth and development, Jean Baker Miller has provided a definition of a positive relationship: that is, one that is growth enhancing for both (or all) members. She suggests that within such a relationship, five good things happen:

- Each person feels a greater sense of energy and vitality.
- Each person feels more able to act and does act.
- Each person has a more accurate picture of her/himself and other persons.
- Each person feels a greater sense of worth.
- Each person feels more connected to the other person and a greater motivation for connection with other people.

The Reach Out to Schools: Social Competency Program fosters the development of "good relationships" in classrooms. These enhanced relationships, the result of explicit instruction and practice in social competency skills, help to create a classroom community that is "growth enhancing" for the students and the teacher.

Student participation in the social competency program and specifically the circle is enthusiastic. The predictable format creates a safe and encouraging environment for the practice of many new skills. And as students recognize new competencies in themselves, they appear more willing to take the risks necessary for learning to occur.

The circle format is a crucial strategy in implementing the curriculum. The activities develop the idea of inclusiveness and empathy for others. Many teachers initially expressed concern about what problems children might bring to the class meetings once the agenda was open. Yet teachers described students turning to the class for help as one of the most positive results of the curriculum. The circle meetings did take time, but teachers felt the time spent in circle to hear and resolve issues helped to develop student skills and freed more class time for traditional academic work. "You can't get on with the rest until these issues are addressed," one teacher said.

The importance of inclusiveness relates to the children in the class as well as to the range of issues discussed during circle. Because participation is not based on previous academic achievement, circle is a place for all students to participate. It includes the skilled and the poor reader equally. Students of limited English proficiency are encouraged to contribute. Students who were having difficulty with peer relationships were described as making progress. Rather than pushing people and issues out the door so that "real work" can begin, the circle activities stressed building relationships, collaborative efforts, and mutual problem solving to advance everyone's learning.

Similar themes apply to the teachers' experiences. They commented repeatedly that having the opportunity to share with other colleagues was very important in developing their understanding and sense of confidence about the new curriculum and the skills expected of them. The program was designed to provide time for teachers to talk about the successes and struggles with the program as well as to teach new skills. Next year, 17 of the 18 teachers involved in the 1990-1991 program have agreed to become mentors for new teachers. Several will assist with the initial training workshops, and others have agreed to begin teacher research. That is an unusually high level of energy and commitment, especially because there is no release time from their classroom responsibilities for these activities nor financial compensation. One teacher commented that although by the end of the school day she was very tired, when she and her fellow teachers went to the monthly meetings they were energized and inspired. Several teachers mentioned their wish to see the group continue after the formal training was completed. Both the classroom circle and the monthly teachers' meetings demonstrate that through building connections, fostering relationships, and advancing collaboration, personal growth and development is

enhanced.

Finally, by including the curriculum in the already crowded schedule of a very short school day, teachers are communicating to children the importance of learning social competency skills as well as traditional academic material. Embedded in the decision to allocate time to change the organization of the classroom, even 15 minutes twice a week, in order to learn and practice these skills, is the much larger belief that positive relationships in the classroom are essential to students' social and academic development.

Future Program Development

The program will be significantly expanded in the coming year as 65 teachers from a total of nine towns will participate in the Social Competency Program. These classrooms reflect a wide demographic range — from suburban to inner city. In addition the 18 experienced teachers from the 1990-1991 program will act as coaches and mentors for teachers in their schools beginning the program. Four experienced teachers will assist in the training workshops throughout the year. And a group of teachers will begin a collaborative research effort to assess the impact of the curriculum in their classrooms.

Also, pilot data for future longitudinal studies will be collected. Based on the interviews and evaluations from 1990-1991, questions in the following areas will be developed:

- impact of the curriculum on individual student behavior
- impact of the curriculum and training on teacher behavior
- changes in classroom atmosphere
- demonstration of carry-over of social competency skills into other subjects
- impact of the curriculum on special education students
- differences in the impact of the curriculum by gender
- contrasts of inner city and suburban schools experience with the use of the curriculum
- teacher response to peer coaching model

As part of an effort to document the project and as a strategy to develop training and promotional materials, several videos will be made of classes using the curriculum and of interviews with teachers and students about the project. In addition, the staff will begin exploring the possibility of a complimentary program for parents that might include workshops, newsletters, and a parent handbook to accompany the classroom curriculum.

We are extremely encouraged by the initial feedback on the impact of this curriculum on classroom practice. The focus in the coming year will be to more fully document the program and to collect sufficient preliminary data to initiate an extensive research program.

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